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AUTHOR Sjolie, Dennis
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ABSTRACT

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U.S. Culture: What You Need to Know to Survive

Dennis Sjolie

University of South Dakota

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of encouraging students to read and experience culture first hand, rather than read about culture as defined by, or channeled through, textbooks. Students new to the U.S. learn about the culture through a variety of publications: Sun, The National Enquirer, People Weekly, Newsweek, and Time. Utilizing this series of print media, students touch the pulse of mainstream U.S. culture and understand that a large percentage of U.S. citizens believe "first hand accounts" of UFO abductions, "learn about the future" through fortunetellers, and discover what their favorite Hollywood celebrities eat for breakfast. Likewise, students learn how a large percentage of U.S. citizens focus on world events, global political situations, and hard news that bears consequence to us all. As the broad and varied aspects of U.S. culture reveal themselves to students, follow-up language/culture learning activities are limited only by the creativity of the instructor.

U.S. Culture: What You Need to Know to Survive

Samovar and Porter (1991) estimate that the literature pertaining to culture contains as many as 150 varying definitions of what constitutes culture. First and foremost, and stripped to the essential, is Irving's (1984) definition: "the shared and learned information people use to generate meaning and order within a social system" (p. 138), and Jacobson's (1996) even more straightforward definition: "a shared way of making sense of experience, based on a shared history" (p. 2). To these matters of culture, we add the matter of communication, and we soon find that a number of language and culture theorists claim that culture and language, or culture and communication, are so closely linked that the two terms are essentially synonymous (Hall, 1959, 1966, 1976; Prosser, 1978; Samovar & Porter, 1991). Kim (1988) contends "language is a 'veil' over the reality of culture in which it is used; involving an agreement of its users about what there is to be seen and how it should be seen" (p. 89). In other words, learning to communicate in one's native culture, or in a new culture, means, as Irving (1984) so adequately states, learning "what to say...who to say it to...how to say it...why you say it...when you say it ...and where you say it" (p. 141).

The task of teaching native culture, of course, falls to the native culture itself. Intensive "cultural brainwashing" known as "enculturation" takes place in the minds of every culture's members, primarily during the formative years of childhood. This is a normal process; it must occur, for it provides each individual with his or her own specific world view, his or her own personal ideology of what is really the truth of all truths, as seen through the glasses of enculturation. Moreover, it is this subtle process of enculturation that prevents people from realizing that culture indeed lies just below the

level of one's conscious thought processes, hidden, for all practical purposes, yet judging and defining and interpreting and evaluating. In this way, culture and enculturation is, as Korzenny (1991) explains, "like water for fish" (p. 57). People are submerged in culture, steeped in culture, yet fail to see it for what it is.

If the foregoing is true, if culture is language/communication, and if language is the veil over the reality of culture, yet culture is something unseen by members of all cultures, how can a second language, and with that second language, a second culture, be taught adequately to second language learners? Furthermore, culture, due to all its subtle nuances and sharply defined specifics, is not adequately learned through lecture or textbooks. Rather, as Althen (1994) insists, culture is something learned beyond the classroom's traditional conceptualizations of the learning process. Culture is learned, Archer (1986) proposes, through culture bumps: the result of a difference in the way people from one culture behave as opposed to the way people from another culture behave in accordance to the same given situation. It is the culture bump that defines the cultural difference, thereby bringing awareness. This idea is in keeping with Wilson's theory that knowledge of culture is learned in the actual experience, rather than from experience. Jacobson (1996) puts it in these terms: "Learning a culture, then, means learning a new way of making sense of experience" (p. 9). But there is more to it than that, Jacobson hastens to add. Understanding experience depends upon understanding the self. In this, learning a new culture requires learning a new self.

But in learning a new culture, there is so much new culture to learn. Maculaitis and Scherega (1992) present various layers of culture they define as "High Culture," the professional arts, "Folk Culture," all traditional, day-to-day aspects of culture, and "Deep

Culture," the culture-bound individual's personal philosophies. To these cultural aspects, we must also add "Pop Culture," defined by Croce (1993) as "a big, loose term for things popular beyond the tastes and standards of a small group of elites" (p. 1). Pop Culture is, of course, that ever-changing, flavor-of-the-month aspect of culture so important to students both inside and outside of the classroom. It is that vital hinge upon which so much of language and successful communication swings. Some students may not understand a word of English, but they know the movie exploits of Tom Cruise. Other students may not utter a single English syllable, but they grasp the attitude of the hip-hop lifestyle. The floodgates of Popular Culture have been opened for them, and they embrace the currents. Now they need to learn the language and sound those deeper, subterranean oceans of culture from which the waters of Pop Culture are frequently drawn. Still other ESL students have little or no idea of American culture, Pop Culture or otherwise.

Herein is the complexity: ESL students must quickly learn not only language, but also culture. Complicating matter further, knowledge of the elements of Pop Culture so readily disdained and dismissed by academe is as essential to students survival in general academic environments, as is knowledge of the elements of High Culture, Folk Culture, and Deep Culture. How do we know this? Certain idiomatic expressions, slang, and trendy catch phrases, together with references to weekly or monthly changing Pop Culture phenomenon find their way into classrooms daily. Few professors and students allow any shred of the once-perceived "formality" of the classroom to alter their everyday speech. References to the matter of Pop Culture – the latest movies, the most current song lyrics, the trendiest TV shows – are abundant in the classroom. Even

TOEFL, hailed as a supreme test of academic English for non-native English speakers, pads its Listening Comprehension section with idiomatic expressions and culture-based colloquialisms. This is surely proof that, as Poole (1992) concludes, "the acquisition of linguistic and socio cultural knowledge [is] integral to one another" (p. 593). Of course, the same classrooms and exams have numerous references to aspects of High Culture, Folk Culture, and Deep Culture in addition. And all of it needs to be learned at the same time, in a very limited amount of time. The "facts" of culture need to be learned together with their implications and nuances, the overtones and the quietly understood.

"In learning a foreign language, the most important thing is not the language, it's the culture," insists Sun (in Morgan, 1999, p. 1). A good way to teach that culture, Sun continues, is to assign students papers in which they compare their native cultures to the American culture they are now beginning to experience first hand. Gasparro and Falletta (1994) believe in the use of poetry as drama so that in the ESL classroom "students are able to develop a sense of awareness of self in the mainstream culture through the dramatic interpretations of poems" (p. 2). Appropriate poems, Gasparro and Falletta advocate, allow learners to become involved with the target language intellectually, emotionally, and physically, thereby experiencing the framework of the new culture. This further allows the learners to sense that the language and the dramatic situations are real, providing a pathway for the language to become internalized and a vital new part of the language learner.

Sokolik (1999), in the preface of her three-part cultural reader series entitled Rethinking America, states, "authentic texts give the student an entry into understanding American culture by hearing authentic voices writing about their views and experiences"

(p. x). These authentic texts, Sokolik continues, are comprised of everything from newspaper articles and magazine articles to book excerpts and short stories – even charts and graphs. The idea behind such eclectic content for a textbook is, in the words of Sokolik:

> To foster cultural awareness, understanding, and interaction among students, and between students and their local setting, whether they are studying English in the U.S. or in another country. (p. x)

But instructors and students need not forever turn to textbooks to find the spirit and essence of American culture. Authentic texts are everywhere: the current periodical section of the library, the newsstand, and even near the checkout counter of the local supermarket. Those exact publications that so many scoff at – Weekly World News, Sun, and The National Enquirer – are a fine place for non-native English speaking students in higher education to begin an exploration of English language as well as American culture. In fact, the very list of publications set as required reading for my class "American Culture: What You Need to Know to Survive" begins with Sun and The National Enquirer, then goes on to include People Weekly, Newsweek, and Time, in that specific order.

Why would anyone in their right mind begin lessons in culture with supermarket tabloids? Because this is the "stuff" of America; the "pulp magazines" that millions upon millions of Americans read each week to laugh about, gossip about and, in some cases, believe. Consider, for example, one cover page of Sun: the July 17, 2001 issue. Its headlines scream, "Bush Hires Psychics to Guide America," "Branded 'Witch' Vows Revenge on [New York] Town," and "World's First Sex-Change Cat." In smaller print,

we discover one of the White House prophecies for 2003: "Robot Children Hold Pope Hostage." What a story! And the photographs: amazing! Even though the inside photos are primarily black and white, save for the cover story photos (pp. 24 & 25), and the photo of the man with his 283-pound dog (p. 29), they are action-oriented and meant to capture attention.

We must consider, too, the advertisements: "Get the breast size you've always wanted... naturally" (p. 8); "Drop dead gorgeous nails grown naturally!!!" (p. 13); and "Witch bottles contain good luck for you" (p. 38). Of course, there are the numerous psychic ads from Miss Cleo, Kenny Kingston, and a host of other "seers" scattered throughout. Add to this the cartoons, the weekly horoscopes, and the personals: "DWM seeking non-white interesting female..." (p. 42).

What an eclectic array of cultural tidbits to help international students capture the pulse of workday America outside – and in some cases, inside – academe. The variety and variations of language and culture learning activities possible from the pages of such a magazine are virtually unlimited. Activities may range from reading and internalizing articles to present individual reports/speeches, panel discussions, role-play dramatizations, or debates. Further article-related activities may include written responses, identification and selection of new vocabulary and idiomatic expressions to generate new sentences, identification and selection of new grammatical forms to generate new sentences, creation of similar articles or advertisements, even written responses to personal ads – for classroom use only. And all the while the students are learning language, they are learning culture, too, by encountering culture first hand. The more students respond and pursue activities related to the magazine content, the more

they interact with one another and the overall culture phenomenon provided by the magazine content, utilizing, of course, all the skill areas of concern in language teaching: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The National Enquirer, long-time number-one selling magazine in America, offers content similar to Sun, but with a stronger focus on celebrity. The breast enlargement ads are still there, as are the psychics, the horoscopes, the cartoons, and the action photos – now all in color. Also, idioms abound. For example, the July 24, 2001, issue of The National Enquirer, with its cover photo of a very distraught "Oprah" beneath the blazing headline "Oprah Collapses: Secret Pregnancy Nightmare at Age 47," opens with an article entitled "Mom Sees Red Over Janet Jackson's Baby Plans" (p. 2). Idioms in this short article include "sees red," "crosses...mind," "took a lot out of..." "heart set on," "tied down," "hoping mad," and "from the old school." The very fact that the articles are drastically short, yet filled with vibrant, exciting language, including vast numbers of colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions, and are accompanied by colorful, exciting photographs, is what makes The National Enquirer such an ideal publication for the teaching of language and culture.

What other cultural lessons, aside from the cultural/linguistic formation of idioms do we gain from the content of tabloids? Certainly we learn lessons of self-indulgence from the extremely personal nature of the advertising: perfect body plus perfect nails plus perfect hair plus perfect personal prophecies, via the horoscopes, add up to a perfect life filled with perfect happiness. The message is loud and clear: the supreme importance of the individual. "Immediate self-gratification" is the cultural mantra. These are not matters of cultural luxury; rather, they are matters of cultural rights. These are cultural

truths upheld by many, tucked neatly between the pages of the supermarket tabloids. What a wealth of cultural information to glean and study for a cover price under $2.00. How interesting it is, too, we note, how American culture, in some ways, is much more superstitious than it might care to admit. Indeed, the psychic ads often carry the disclaimer "for entertainment purposes only"; nevertheless, there sits Miss Cleo: smiling, all-knowing, all-seeing, benevolent and radiant, and waiting to share secrets from the great unknown.

What about cartoons? Chan, Kaplan-Weinger, and Sandstrom, in Fantini (1997) state, "Students are often frustrated by their inability to understand the target culture, especially its humor. Comic strips offer humorous materials that comment upon the culture" (p. 156). Our example issue of Sun offers nine cartoons and three written jokes, each reflecting cultural viewpoints on behaviors noted for being comical. Our example of The National Enquirer, however, offers only one cartoon. Perhaps the feeling here is that the "All the Gossip" section (pp. 12-13) offers enough humor with a cultural slant in and of itself.

People Weekly is a good "slick" magazine to turn to when students finish with the tabloids. By this time, students are ready for more "realistic" magazine content; albeit the articles here are still of a bite-size nature, the photographs remain colorful and action-oriented, and the "news" remains "soft" and celebrity-driven. Tom Cruise's smiling and boyish face graces the cover of our July 30, 2001, example issue of People Weekly, inviting student to explore the pages within.

And what do we find within? An actual table of contents, to begin with, is here (pp. 2-3), followed by a "letter" page (p. 4), that encourages readers to forward their

comments and reactions to previous issues. Gone are the psychic hotline ads and the silliest of the self-gratification ads. Here, the advertising becomes more sophisticated: an advertisement for stylish beaded jewelry (p. 7) and one for Polaroid camera (p. 13). There is also a "Citigroup" ad (p. 16), further indicating that this publication is geared toward a different type of buyer: a daiquiri-drinking, face-towlette-cleaning, new-car-buying reader who wants to be kept up to the minute on the happenings of Janet Jackson, Tom Cruise and his new girlfriend Penelope Cruz, and tennis star Andre Agassi. And there's more: a hard news tribute to Washington Post editor Katherine Graham (pp. 61-62) and an update on the JFK Jr. and Bessette financial estates (p. 65). Again, the short articles are written in a lively fashion, filled with idiomatic expressions; plenty of personality profiles on everyone from Catherine Zeta Jones to Mark Wahlberg to 'Nsync. Plus, there is sufficient new vocabulary for any vocabulary instructor's tastes. Such a publication is a veritable salad of Pop Culture tossed with High Culture and heavily seasoned with Folk Culture and Deep Culture.

A dramatic shift from one slick magazine to another is the shift from People Weekly and its celebrity-oriented, Pop Culture focus to Newsweek and its hard news, current events content. Newsweek from July 30, 2001, has a cover bearing a single caption: "Remembering Katherine Graham 1917-2001," imposed beside the jaw of the late Ms. Graham, indicating the issue's feature or "cover" story. Nevertheless, what students find fun and interesting and what screams "American culture" from Newsweek, and Time as well, is the first few pages: a veritable potpourri of news, ideas, and tidbits. Our example issue of Newsweek contains paragraphs on "Brian Billick: Super Coach" (p. 4); "Terrorism: The Secret Reasons for the Alert" (p. 6), "Higher Ed: Till We Build It,

You Can't Come" (p. 8); and "Many Faces of Madge" (p. 10), a look at the various incarnations of Madonna.

After several more pages, we come to "My Turn (p. 14), a weekly guest column encouraging people of all careers and life situations to take up pen or word processor and write an article about whatever happens to be on their minds. After reading the current issue's "My Turn," and perhaps another half-dozen supplementary "My Turn" articles, and discussing the articles' content, concerns, and grammar, students can write their own "My Turn." It's a great exercise!

For those who want humor, especially humor with a political edge, Newsweek offers "Perspectives" (p. 17), a collection of the week's most interesting newspaper cartoons together with quips from various newsworthy individuals. Of course, later in the magazine, the "Newsmaker's" page (p. 41) appears. This particular issue is devoted to the likes of Tom Cruise, Penelope Cruz, and the Dixie Chicks, primarily.

Despite the fluff and Pop Culture hints, Newsweek provides numerous hard news articles for students to grapple with. The articles in this issue include "First Blood: Death and Violence in Genoa..." (p. 21); "A Nuke Train Gets Ready to Roll" (p. 26); and "Katherine Graham: A Woman of Valor and Grace..." (p. 42). Among the articles, we find the advertisements – many of which pertaining to technology, investments, and automobiles – all designed for sophisticated, well-educated readers.

Time is the final magazine in our collection of culture-teaching print media. Specifically, our example issue is from August 6, 2001; its cover sporting a cartoon caricature of a child wearing a king's crown behind the caption "Do Kids Have Too Much Power?"

Despite a format essentially similar to the format of Newsweek, Time offers an amount of difference that is certainly noteworthy. The first few pages of Time also include newsworthy quotations, a "Winners & Losers" section (p. 13), very short current articles such as "Who Holds Cards on Stem-cell Vote" (p. 14), and a statistics section labeled "Numbers" (p. 15). There is a section of famous people – who is sick, who is sentenced, who is recently deceased – entitled "Milestones" (p. 19). Again, such pages are of vast importance to students of language and culture.

Now for the hard news, and there is plenty of it. This particular issue of Time opens with "Bush's Two Sides" (p. 20) and moves to articles such as "Fire Over Indonesia" (p. 30) and "China's Lifestyle Choices" (p. 32), includes a business article "Recovery at Risk" (p. 34), and introduces the feature story "Who's In Charge Here?" (p. 40). Ultimately, we reach pages of reviews: television, film, books, and music (pp. 56-62). Of course, we have another page entitled "People" (p. 71) with bright photographs of Michael Jackson, Paul McCartney, and Mariah Carey. Even one of the most respected news magazines in the world must include its "fluff" page. Mariah Carey in her little pink sleeveless tee-shirt with a pink Superman/Superwoman logo may not be the essence of hard news, but she is indeed the fluff of Pop Culture.

The example issue of Time ends with a most poignant and ironic article by Rosenblatt (2001): "Why I Won't Write About Chandra Levy" (p. 72). There is much for students to gain from laboring through such an essay. Writing of this caliber is essential for academic language study. Furthermore, the sweeping aspect of culture encapsulated within this column alone is worth the cover price of the issue.

Why not include a newspaper in this set of print media for language/culture study? Certainly we could. U.S.A. Today offers the news in a lively, culture-laden format. But many newspaper articles get too long, the writing filled with too any idioms or cultural nuances to address all at once. Nevertheless, particular newspaper columns such as "Ann Landers" or "Dear Abby" are ideal for student exercises. These shorter columns provide the same bite-size articles of Sun, The National Enquirer, People Weekly, Newsweek, and Time. Here, the articles are more self-contained, more approachable, and more teachable.

Of course, there are critics who warn against the use of too much culture used too indiscriminately in the classroom. Holly (1990) and Phillipson (1992) suggest the marketing and promotion of English is a new form of colonialism geared toward economic ends and leading to, as Zaid (1999) states, "an undermining of native cultures" (p. 7). Language teachers must, Zaid continues:

> promote the culture but not indoctrinate; they must select material and design activities which will merge language and culture, but they must realize that this material and these activities may produce "culture shock" which will prevent linguistic goals from being met; and they must monitor their own use of language so closely that they will not be seen as subconsciously promulgating or encoding a cultural mindset in their students. (p. 5)

Certainly, our purpose in teaching culture is not one of cultural confrontation or cultural one-upmanship; rather, the purpose is to assist students in adapting to the new society they see around themselves. Even more importantly, the purpose is to help students gain useful, first-hand insight and experience regarding the new and varied

forms of language and culture they encounter in the classroom and in their daily lives. Ultimately, knowledge of the unfamiliar culture they discover unfolding around them is what they need to comprehend and understand to survive their new educational experience and meet the demands therein competently and successfully.

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Signature: Dennis Sjolie

Printed Name Position Title: Dennis Sjolie Assis. Prof. of English/ESL

Organization Address: University of South Dakota
414 E. Clark St.
Vermillion, South Dakota 57069

Telephone: (605) 677-5977 Fax: (605) 677-5298

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